

**Abstract ID :** 969

**Title :** AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR THE MEKONG RIVER IRRAWDDY DOLPHIN POPULATION - STATUS AND CONSERVATION CONCERNS

**Category :** Conservation

**Student :** Not Applicable

**Preferred Format :** Either Oral or Poster Presentation

**Abstract :** The first dedicated research project investigating the population status of the Mekong River Irrawaddy Dolphin *Orcaella brevirostris* population was initiated in 2001, in collaboration with James Cook University, Wildlife Conservation Society and the Cambodian Department of Fisheries. The primary aims of the project are to undertake a comprehensive status assessment of the Irrawaddy dolphin population, develop effective conservation and management initiatives and build capacity amongst local government officials. The project consists of boat and interview surveys throughout the Cambodian Mekong River, initiation of a stranding/recovery program to establish mortality rates and causes and a community awareness program - integrating discussions amongst local communities, to develop community-based management initiatives.

This research indicates that the Mekong River Irrawaddy dolphin population is small (with the total population possibly as low as 100 individuals) and restricted in range (at least during the dry season) to the upper 190 km of river from Kratie to the Lao/Cambodian border. Three years of surveys have been conducted over this river stretch (a total of 5674.8 km of survey effort during 471.2 hours). Although a number of threats have been identified, such as habitat degradation, overfishing and potential dam and waterway construction, by-catch in local gillnet fisheries appears to be the most significant current threat to the population's survival. The stranding and recovery program indicates that with the current mortality rate (11 dolphins in 2003), the population may become locally extinct in the Mekong River in the next 10-15 years, if effective conservation and management activities are not initiated immediately.

The results of this research have provided baseline data for future research and conservation efforts on the Irrawaddy dolphin population that inhabits the Mekong River. Effective conservation and management strategies will be developed and undertaken in collaboration with local government departments and through community-based consultation and management programs.